

Noodle-throwing, street-sweeping, shamanic healing: it's all happening in the name of art

Forget standing in a gallery - today's artists, from AA Bronson to Marvin Gaye Chetwynd, want you to turn on, tune in and drop all your inhibitions. Welcome to the weird world of art happenings

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The word “happening” conjures up images from 1960s artsploitation movies - models rolling around in paint, perhaps, to a soundtrack of hectic free jazz. But more than half a century after the term was coined, it's an apt fit for a very current art-world tendency. Collaborative, often one-off events that take place beyond gallery walls, happenings blur the boundaries between art forms - as well as those between artist and audience - and embrace happenstance, or even chaos.

You might find yourself in a darkened studio thronged with strangers, where Nástio Mosquito, dressed in white, is heckled by his own musicians and plies you with whisky and bananas. Perhaps you'll sit on a cafe floor after hours, eating popcorn while the robotic voice of Karl Holmqvist intones Willow Smith lyrics. Maybe on a rooftop you'll watch an explicit movie accompanied by Prem Sahib's DJ set, or participate in a neo-shamanic ritual led by AA Bronson, or huddle in a Glasgow flat for the brightly costumed life-as-art experiment Mega Hammer.

Marvin Gaye Chetwynd, known as a performance artist, says that the first Mega Hammer event last year was "pure expression and a moment where you had a sense of freedom and didn't have to explain yourself". Chetwynd, Jędrzej Cichosz and collaborators from around the world are now reviving Mega Hammer for the Glasgow International festival in an event that will involve accordion playing, "futurist food" and many, many copies of the Guinness World Records.

In London this week, the arts organisation Smith+Brown will restage what was regarded as the first happening: Theatre Piece No 1, John Cage's infamous 1952 "event" at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. Neither score nor documentation exist of the performance; Smith+Brown have had to interpret information from first-hand accounts. Known elements of the original work include danced episodes performed by Merce Cunningham and the presence of Robert Rauschenberg's White Painting. "There are lots of

descriptions of the event, but all of them disagree,” explains Victoria Miguel of Smith+Brown. “This is not purely nostalgic. We’re not attempting to recreate something exactly as it was in 1952 - we live in a different world.”

Instead, Smith+Brown are drawing together eminent contemporary practitioners, including the artist Richard Wentworth and dancer Julie Cunningham, to create aspects of Theatre Piece No 1. In place of the White Paintings, the performance space will be hung with abstract works made by participants in the preceding days. These will be created according to Rudolf Stingel’s Instructions, a participatory artwork from 1989 in which the artist offered a step-by-step guide to making one of his pieces. True to Cage’s idea of non-obstructive collaboration, Smith+Brown won’t see all the elements come together until the first performance.

The collaborative, participatory and often ad hoc nature of happenings courts the possibility that things may go awry. Matt Copson created A Woodland Truce, his “play without actors”, for the first in a series of happenings this year in London at the Serpentine Gallery’s cafe. An anti-Aesop’s Fable starring Copson’s anarchic and bloodthirsty sculpted bestiary, the work featured live and recorded vocals by actors and singers. Copson says the tension that accompanies the possibility of failure is “the key to something that’s live. It has the potential to be transcendently revolutionary or fall flat on its face. That has to be embraced, even if it’s tough from a creative point of view.”

Happenings also reject the more commercial aspects of the art industry. “Living near the Chelsea galleries in New York for many years, I found myself overwhelmed by the heating up of the art market. I was determined to make something that stepped outside of the market, and put the direct experience before the saleable product,” says AA Bronson, who worked for 25 years as part of the pioneering collaborative trio General Idea and has investigated areas such as shamanism and healing practices in his event-based work. “My most recent performance was my least exotic: I methodically swept the sidewalk outside Maureen Paley’s gallery in Bethnal Green. People walking by had no idea this was a performance at all.”

Bronson also notes that the collaborative aspect of happenings runs counter to received ideas of how an artist should behave. “It has always been interesting to me that writers, musicians, actors, dancers, in fact people in virtually every creative discipline, have always been able to work collaboratively. But apparently not visual artists. The market discourages artists from collaborating, because collaborative works for the most part do not sell.”

There’s a self-initiated, DIY aspect to all of this that draws heavily on the spirit of punk, rave and nightclub culture. Artist Jim Lambie constructed his sculptural performance space the Poetry Club in Glasgow over a month in 2012 as a venue for the New York punk legend Richard Hell to do a spoken word presentation. “I rapidly realised that having our own space would mean

we could do our own programming. There was a chance to experiment more,” he explains.

The Poetry Club is now a constantly mutating extension of both Lambie’s work with dizzying sculptural installations and his interest in music culture. He regards the club itself as an artwork: not only the sculptural elements of the interior, which continue to develop, but also the archiving and documentation of performances and events, and the presence and participation of the audience.

“The shared experience, first-hand knowledge and ‘being there’ add layers to the realness,” says Lambie. “Your whole perceptive field is alive - not just your eyes and ears. ”

How to make the most of a happening

1. Follow instructions

During AA Bronson’s first happening as a student 50 years ago, participants were instructed to throw cold wet noodles at him as he stood naked under a spotlight. The event “devolved into classic New York ‘happening’ chaos”. At events with General Idea, the audience was coached to laugh, clap, or deliver a standing ovation on cue. If you choose to follow them, instructions allow you to cross the line from observing to participating.

2. Don’t just spectate - engage

“It’s hard to be truly moved or discomforted by anything because we’re so desensitised by the barrage of images,” says Matt Copson. “It’s hard to be anything

other than a passive consumer of things.” If you want comforting passive consumption, watch reality TV: here you are part of the action. There may be no right or wrong way to respond to what is going on, but your mood and actions are component parts of the environment as perceived by everyone else.

3. Shed your inhibitions

Prem Sahib’s installation works often draw on sites of uninhibited theatricality and performance, such as nightclubs or cruising locations. At one live event, he screened Wakefield Poole’s 1972 erotic art film *Bijou* on a rooftop at night in the hope that the darkened setting would liberate it and those who watched it. “When I first saw it at the Tate, it felt like it would have been inappropriate to have an erection, or engage properly with the desires that I felt the film elicits,” he says.

4. Think before you reach for your cameraphone

Unless, that is, you prefer to watch all cultural events on a tiny screen - even one happening at life size, in real time, in the same space as you. Granted, some events seem immaculately choreographed for an attendant chorus of tiny cameras - but are you sure you want to encourage them?

5. Use your feet

If it’s not happening for you, leave.

Smith+Brown’s Instruction/Event is at Soho Revue, London, from 5-9 April. The Poetry Club’s events and exhibition, along with Mega Hammer events, are part of

the Glasgow international festival, from 8-25 April. The next Serpentine Gallery Magazine Session is on 18 April.

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